

Resurrection Living

Last week we looked at the impotence of rule-based living—the impossibility of managing the indulgences of our sinful natures by following man-made rules. We acknowledged the very human impulse to fence God’s holy commands by erecting protective, manmade rules around them. After all, we reason, the further we stay away from the precipice of disobedience, the better off we are.

For instance, since the Bible warns against sexual immorality, rule-keepers invest all their energies in not being immoral. But they do so at the expense of their vertical relationship with God. Since the best way to avoid immorality is to keep away from activities that might lead to it, they build for themselves fences that they then make mandatory for everyone. We noted one fence many still defend today is a ban on pop music and dancing. Instead of doing the hard work of teaching young people discernment and infusing them with a passion for holiness and life in the Spirit, some pastors and youth leaders just say “No!” and impose ill-advised prohibitions against various kinds of entertainments.

Such rules, Paul says, 📌 “...have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of *no value* in stopping the indulgence of the flesh” (Colossians 2:23).

There’s something else wrong with a rule-based approach to Christian living. **You don’t need God to keep man-made rules. You aren’t drawn to God by keeping the rules. You become afraid and ashamed when you break the rules. Successful rule-keepers easily become more impressed by their own morality than by God’s mercy and grace.** They can hold God at arm’s length, tick off their obediences, and feel like good Christians.

In fact, God can become a bit of an annoyance to rule-keepers, an uncomfortable reminder that following Jesus is about—well—actually following Jesus: submitting to his leadership, replicating his life in ours by the power of his indwelling Spirit, and loving and serving others.

Rule-keeping, as a strategy for life, is a way to be religious, pious, even spiritual on our own terms. Fence-building and keeping rules is insidiously seductive. It can even morph into folly and rebellion as we become so pleased with our attempts to please God we think God owes us.

You can't live your new life in Christ tethered to the grave of your old life in the world. And rule-keepers do exactly that—they focus their energy and attention on not-sinners in ways that keep them pre-occupied with guilt, temptation and sin.

Chapter three of Colossians provides the antidote to rule-based religion. Paul has already introduced this in Colossians 2:6: “...just as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him...”


In chapter three, Paul explains what it means to walk—to live—in Jesus; to live out of and to live into our new identity: ▶“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory” (Colossians 3:1-4 ESV).

Rule-keepers, of necessity, focus horizontally on this world, this life—what might be wrong and how to avoid it.

Biblical Christianity calls us to refocus our attention vertically. If you have indeed been raised with Christ, persistently seek what is above, where Christ is, enthroned in a position of honor and authority at God's right hand. Keep on focusing your attention on God's Kingdom, his glory and his righteousness; God's church and the good news of Jesus—things that are above, not on earthly things. You were buried with Jesus into his death, symbolized by your immersion in the waters of baptism, and joined to him—raised with him—in his resurrection. Your very life—your *truest identity*—now is hidden securely with Christ in God. Who we really are will not be exposed until Jesus himself is unveiled from heaven. Only then will we share his glory.

Resurrection life is a startling transformation. It's something like being approached by the government of New Zealand asking you to renounce your citizenship in the USA, and become a full-fledged Kiwi, a citizen of their country. Furthermore, they want you to be their official ambassador to America, your previous homeland.

Think about what you will have to do in order to fulfill your responsibilities: you will have to take a crash course in New Zealand culture, history and laws; it will require regular communication with the leadership of New Zealand and a commitment to it's welfare. It will require a total transformation of your identity, your values, and your assumptions about life: what matters and how it matters. You live in America but New Zealand is your new homeland, even though you've never been there.

Computer geeks understand the significance of  operating systems—OS. I work in a Microsoft Windows environment. Apple users are served by MacOS. There are others.

“An operating system (OS) is [computer] system software that manages computer hardware and software resources, and provides common services for computer programs” (Wikipedia). In other words, OS works in the background providing the necessary infrastructure for all the programs that run within the system. Whether we're writing emails, working with spreadsheets, or doing homework, our computer OS keeps everything running in good order.

When one becomes a Christian, God gives us his Spirit to live within us. We are given a new OS that becomes the framework for our new life, working in the background with everything we do. It shapes our identity, reconfigures our morals, values and ambitions. We may not always be aware of it, but it's always running even when we're not thinking about it: working, playing, reading, watching TV, mowing the law, shopping, going out with friends—everything!

Seeking those things above and focusing our minds on things above may be likened to becoming more adept at understanding and using and being transformed by God's spiritual OS—our new you.

Those of us who grew up in the church have, by a subconscious process of osmosis, absorbed many of the features of our Spiritual OS. We can easily forget how transformational our calling is and become lax in our dual citizenship.

God keeps calling us back to our heavenly home, to pay attention to him and the Kingdom of Christ.

Think about what Paul has already told us about the radical transformation God has worked in our lives. God qualified us to share in Christ's kingdom of light by rescuing us from Satan's this-world dominion of darkness and transferring our citizenship to Christ's Kingdom. We used to be dead in our trespasses and wrong-doing, ruled by the impulses of our sinful passions, but God made us alive in Christ. Our sins were nailed to the cross and paid in full. We are dead to our old life and totally pardoned, absolutely forgiven—reconciled to God.

God linked our lives to Jesus so completely that Jesus' death became our death—we died in and with Christ to the entirety of our old life and everything in this world. Jesus' resurrection became our resurrection. Our life is now bound up with his in heaven at the right hand of the Father.

In Jesus, God's presence is our heart's true home.

So, Paul says, if this is indeed true of us, as we believe it is, **refocus your ambitions and redirect your attention.** Seek what is above where Jesus is, and habituate your mind to God's perspective, to God's OS.

▶“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.”

If Paul could address the Evangelical Church in America today, he might well remind us of these verses. They pinpoint what is perhaps one of our most significant lapses.

On the way in this morning I listened to a podcast by Trevin Wax. It's one of a series under the banner *Reconstructing Faith*. In an interview with Pastor David Platt, Platt said: ▶“There is an American gospel in which we are called to take up an American dream, not take up a cross.”

He adds “Our hearts have been hijacked by an American gospel. We have exchanged a biblical gospel that exalts Jesus above everything, even our own lives, for an American gospel that prostitutes Jesus for the sake of comfort, power, politics, and prosperity in this world” (Reconstructing Faith, Season 1, episode 9: *The Silent Scandal*).

We have marketed Jesus as the ultimate self-help guru who will always make our lives better. We talk about how Jesus can heal our brokenness, wash away our shame, and make us feel better about ourselves. Jesus can fix our marriages, enhance our careers and save our country. With Jesus you can enjoy your best life now, have fun in retirement, have an easy death and then go to heaven!

And there is some truth in all these things. Jesus transforms us from the inside out as we walk with him, and that transformation affects every aspect of our lives.

But on a purely functional level, what often happens is that we end up *using* Jesus—Platt calls it prostituting Jesus—accessorizing our lives with Jesus primarily to pursue a better life here on earth right now. Our focus still remains almost entirely *horizontal*—earthbound. We want Jesus to improve our personal selves, our character, our incomes, our homes, and our families, but actually seeking what is above, and directing our thoughts to heavenly spiritual realities for the sake of Christ’s Kingdom and glory gets lost in the fog. We’re too busy or too distracted. We don’t want to do bad things but we’re not sure we want to be all that devoted.

So when we read our Bibles, we do so pragmatically, for immediate application, and allocate little thought to the re-formation of our hearts into the character of Jesus, re-orienting our ambitions to serving Christ—his Kingdom and gospel.

Paul began his letter to the Ephesians with these words: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the *heavenly places*...” (Ephesians 1:3). If that’s true, and it is, it only makes sense that we redirect our aspirations and attention to things above where Jesus is, where our truest blessings may be found.

We're not suggesting a rule for how much time we ought to spend investing our energies in and thinking about spiritual things. That takes us back to legalism, to crafting a manageable faith on our own terms.

But we must take Paul's words seriously.

For instance, I heard this week that the average American *adult* spends about ninety minutes every day on their cell phones. Teenagers average about nine hours: talking, texting, using social media, watching TikTok or YouTube videos—not including homework.

We have to ask ourselves, "What is forming us?"

What if we spent some quality alone time with God puzzling over what it means to refocus our thoughts and ambitions on heavenly realities: actually and actively seeking God's Kingdom and righteousness, God's will and purposes, God's person and character, and our Savior Jesus himself?

For me, I have to do this first thing, before my day takes off. If I'm not intentional about setting time aside to seek the things above, I'll put it off for the rest of the day.

What might it mean for you to sustain a heavenly focus while living in a demanding, distracting world? What would it mean to re-evaluate your choices, your priorities, your lifestyles, your values and your dreams in light of your identity and position in Christ who sits at God's right hand?

Whose OS are we running on?

For Christ-followers, this is no idle question. Paul is urging us to set Christ and his Kingdom as the larger, more significant context in which we live out our lives.

This doesn't happen in a day. And it will never happen if we limit our seeking to an hour or two on Sunday morning. It takes a lifetime of intentionality, hearts and minds conditioned to time alone with God. It means habituating ourselves to a long pursuit in the same direction toward Christ and his Kingdom.

Christ is our very life, Paul says. We died to our old life in the world and our lives now have been hidden, united with Christ in God, where Christ sits at the right hand of God.

Some cultures believe in something called a life-token: an external object said to be that in which a person's life is bound up. How many of you followed the Harry Potter books and movies? In *Harry Potter and the Half-blood Prince*, our hero encountered a kind of life-token in the form of a horcrux. "A Horcrux is a powerful object in which a Dark wizard or witch has hidden a *fragment* of his or her soul for the purpose of attaining immortality. ...the more horcruxes one creates, the closer one is to true immortality" In the Harry Potter world, if you want to finally destroy the person, you also have to destroy all their horcruxes.

In a far richer and deeper way, the *whole* of our real selves—not merely bits and pieces—the *whole* of our real selves is bound-up with and hidden in Jesus. They are kept safe and can never be destroyed!

The Apostle Peter added this dimension: ▶ "According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, **who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time**" (1 Peter 1:3–5 ESV).


Our very souls are secreted away with Christ in God where we are eternally kept by God's power.

The reality of that hidden existence may not be immediately visible to a watching world. They have the right to see glimpses of it when they witness our good works done in loving service to others, or when they encounter the fruit of the Spirit manifesting itself in our godly character and transformed relationships.

David Platt quoted the Apostle Peter: "...in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you..." (1 Peter 3:15 ESV).

Then he said, and I'm paraphrasing: "When is the last time anyone asked? If no one is asking, is anyone seeing a notable difference?"

Who we are in Christ will not be fully revealed until that great day when Christ returns in glory. Then every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. And only then will we be revealed with him, sharing his glory.

Until then, as people raised to new life in Jesus,  we keep seeking those things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. We keep redirecting our minds, focusing in on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For we have died, and our life—our truest self—is hidden with Christ in God.

When I was a kid my family used to join my aunts and uncles and cousins at Grandma Cumings house every chance we got. One of the things my cousins and I loved to do there was gather around her old, out of tune, upright piano and sing. Cousin Sue would play and we all chimed in with what parts we could.

One old quartet song we sang regularly lustily affirmed:

*This world is not my home I'm just a-passin' through
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue
The angels beckon me from heaven's open door
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore*

I still love it. We have died with Christ so indeed, this world is not our home. We are strangers and pilgrims here, just passing through. Our treasures are above where we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus who is seated at the right hand of the Father.

Live that. Embed that truth in the deepest recesses of your soul. Be ambitious for Christ and his Kingdom—seek him. Think about this new life of yours. Be intentional about the activity of your minds.

Chapter three marks a joyous turning point in Colossians. Paul has been laboring to expose the error of the false teachers who promoted a new, super-spirituality that was powerless to change lives.

Beginning here, Paul *celebrates ordinary* Christian living. It's extraordinary. Paul will go on to unpack what this new resurrection life looks like, and that's what we'll begin to explore next week.

Benediction:

“Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen” (Jude 1:24-25).